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SUBJECT: NGOs and Media Finding Space to Advance Environmental  
Protection in South China

REF: Guangzhou 139

11. (SBU) Summary: NGOs and the media in south China are managing to find ways - within the limited space the government allows them to operate - to advance environmental protection in south China. Although local authorities permit little if any direct criticism of their handling of environmental issues, NGOs have had some success by focusing instead on raising public awareness. The media, including newspapers and Internet message boards, are also contributing to heightened public concern about the environment. The Guangdong government appears to be encouraging media coverage of environmental problems, as long as any criticism is directed at other parts of China; the public readily understands that such criticisms often are actually directed at the poor performance of the local authorities. Our contacts feel that the Sichuan earthquake may have helped change the Chinese government's attitude towards NGOs and the media, and they are optimistic that opportunities and openness will increase in the next few years, including perhaps more openness about the Internet, which is increasingly difficult to censor. End Summary.

Direct Challenge to Local Government Brings Crackdown  
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12. (SBU) Greenpeace became the first independent environmental NGO to operate in south China when it opened its Guangzhou office in 2002, according to Lai Yun, a Greenpeace employee based here. (Note: The Chinese government sponsors many organizations that it calls NGOs, but which function more as extensions of the government - the ubiquitous "GONGO." End note.) Growing to eleven staff members, the Guangzhou office had what it considered a major success in 2006, when it publicized research showing that many vegetables sold in supermarkets in Guangzhou and exported to Hong Kong contained unsafe levels of pesticides.

13. (SBU) Although the pesticide report generated extensive media coverage and brought promises of change by the Guangzhou government, it also resulted, Lai said, in a crackdown. Soon after the report was publicized, police raided the Greenpeace office and forced it to shut down because it lacked the proper license. (Note: None of the independent environmental NGOs in south China have been able to obtain licenses to operate as NGOs; they instead have business licenses. This prevents them from raising money through donations and thus places them in constant danger of being shut down. End note.) Lai explained that, after lengthy negotiations, the

government allowed them to reopen a cramped and anonymous office with just two staffers; they have to refrain from speaking to the media and can not conduct public education programs.

14. (SBU) Chastened by this experience, the two remaining staff members focus on research on environmental issues facing south China. They pass along their reports to Greenpeace offices in Hong Kong and Beijing, which can publicize the research. Lai told us that relations with the Guangzhou government have improved somewhat the last year, and he was hopeful of reaching an agreement to expand the office.

#### Greenpoint Takes the Long View

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15. (SBU) The most active environmental NGO in south China is Greenpoint, which was founded last year by Zhang Lifan, formerly an official at Guangdong's Environmental Protection Bureau (EPB). Through his work at the EPB's education center, Zhang developed close relationships with many of the student environmental groups springing up at university campuses across the province. Zhang left the EPB last year and started Greenpoint, which he said has nearly 6000 student members and four permanent staff.

16. (SBU) Zhang told us he viewed Greenpeace's experience as proof of the futility of direct confrontation with polluters and the government. He asserted that the best strategy was instead to avoid controversy while promoting public awareness of environmental problems. In organizing seminars and educational campaigns directed primarily at university students, Greenpoint has adopted a gradualist strategy. Zhang said that his goal was for Greenpoint's student members to develop an environmental awareness that they

GUANGZHOU 00000418 002 OF 003

would carry with them years from now, as they move into the elite of Chinese society.

17. (SBU) Many of Greenpoint's campaigns are actually at the government's behest. Zhang told us that they are often asked by the EPB to publicize new environmental regulations and policies. Greenpoint even collaborated on a road show that visited 22 cities in Guangdong to tout the EPB's accomplishments during 2007. Greenpoint's close ties to the government call into question just how independent it really is. However, Zhang, along with his former EPB colleague Yuan Shuwen, who now works for the Hong Kong-based NGO Friends of the Earth (HK), clearly consider their organizations to be completely independent of the government. Zhang and Yuan both said that they view the EPB as having far more environmentally progressive views than the rest of the provincial government, and so they are happy to use their NGOs to help promote the EPB, calculating that a strong EPB advances the cause of environmental protection.

#### The Role of the Media

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18. (SBU) Despite their differing strategies, one thing about which the two NGOs agree is that the weakness of the NGO community in south China increases the importance of the media in promoting environmental awareness. Both Lai and Zhang complimented the Southern Metropolis Daily, noting it had published several widely-read stories that had increased public concern about environmental issues. Lai also mentioned the importance of Internet message boards, which he said played a major role in organizing the protests over the proposed chemical plant in Fujian (reftel).

19. (SBU) Lu Hui, a Southern Metropolis Daily journalist who last year wrote a series of articles on water quality problems in central China, agreed that the media had played a major role in increasing environmental awareness. According to Lu, the articles in his paper about environmental problems have been so popular that they increase newspaper sales. Because of their potential as a revenue generator, Lu said, his paper is planning to increase the number of stories it will run this year about environmental issues.

110. (SBU) Lu explained that central government support had enabled

Chinese newspapers to report more openly on environmental issues. Still, he noted that the paper was careful not to report on problems within Guangdong, for fear of reprisals from the local government. (Note: Southern Metropolis is widely considered to be one of the most daring newspapers in China in challenging the government. This has caused problems in the past; for example, the paper's deputy editor was sent to prison in 2004 in what many believed to be a politically motivated case related to the paper's coverage of SARS. End note.) Lu pointed out that all of the major environmental stories published by the paper had been about problems elsewhere in China, and were not embarrassing to Guangdong officials, though readers would certainly wonder to themselves whether problems were similar here. He added that the paper frequently ran positive articles, in part to give it more freedom to print negative stories.

#### Optimism about the Future

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¶11. (SBU) All of our contacts agree that South China is an especially difficult environment for NGOs. Greenpeace's Lai told us that while Beijing and northern China have dozens of active environmental NGOs, Guangdong has just a handful -- the three mentioned above, as well as Green Camp, a Beijing-based group that seeks to involve students in ecological projects. Still, Southern Metropolis' Lu and the NGO representatives all expressed optimism about what the future holds for environmental NGOs and the media. Lu asserted that the growth of the Internet would force the government to loosen its control over the media, because it is more difficult to censor. Lu further argued that the Chinese government was starting to understand that the internet not only posed a threat to, but that it could also strengthen support for governmental policies. He pointed to the online response to the "Tibetan riots" this spring as an example.

GUANGZHOU 00000418 003 OF 003

¶12. (SBU) Greenpeace's Lai told us that he had noticed a major shift in the government's attitude towards NGOs and the media while he was working in Sichuan following the May earthquake. Zhang and Yuan Shuwen, the China Manager for Friends of the Earth, a Hong Kong-based NGO that has partnered with Greenpoint on several projects, echoed this sentiment, arguing that the earthquake demonstrated to the government that NGOs play a necessary and important role in society. Yuan added that the earthquake had also showed the government that the small NGO community in China lacked the resources to fully meet government needs in the event of a disaster.

¶13. (SBU) Zhang and Yuan both told us that they believed the role of environmental NGOs would increase rapidly over the next few years. Yuan asserted that the government was mainly concerned with making and enforcing regulations, and that it had little ability to promote public participation, leaving a void to be filled by NGOs. Zhang agreed, explaining that he had left the government last year because he believed the NGO community would, over time, become the leading force in environmental protection in China.

¶14. (SBU) Our contacts told us that the best website for public discussion of environmental issues in China is the Green Society Environmental Action Network: <http://www.gsean.org/site/index.html>. It includes some information in English, although the bulletin board is entirely in Chinese.

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